

Chapter Four -- "To Church, to Meetin' We Do Go."

There never was a dull moment at church, except for some of the sermons, but when the off-brand religions came around, it was a three-ring circus.

The preachers we knew didn't exactly preach the same sermons over and over again, but we had a pretty good notion what to expect. And even a visiting Baptist or Campbellite was likely to stick pretty close to his knitting, and rock along in the old-fashioned way. But when the new-fangled preachers came along, the old-time religion was sure to be dished out liberally, good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over; and sometimes it had been tampered with to where you couldn't hardly recognize it.

We always went to hear everybody a time or two, no matter what they preached. Every new sort of preacher brought in some new songs, and now an' then the sermons made right good listenin'.

About the most regular ones to come in were the Mormons, traveling two by two, on foot, and stayin' where they were offered shelter an' food. They made some converts, too.

The Mormons had some powerful preachers, an' when they'd get to going strong, the Methodist an' Baptist an' Campbellite preachers'd get disturbed over their flocks, an' there'd be some high ol' times.

One time, I recall, the Mormons sent in a pair of rip-roarin' preachers, an' the best one bantered ol' Milburn Long for a debate. Brother Long knew he was no match for him, an' refused.

When Brother Short heard about it, he was maddern a wet hen, an' sent word he'd debate both of 'em at the same time on the same subject.

I'm not old enough to remember what the subject was, but the schoolhouse was packed every day for a week for the debate, an' crowds stood outside morning, evening and night. Those Mormons were good talkers, but Brother Short had a voice like a fog-horn, (whatever that is) an' when he got goin' strong you could hear him two counties away. He just tore up jack with both those Mormons, an' by the time the debate ended Friday night he was still goin' strong, and they couldn't hardly speak above a whisper, either of 'em.

I don't remember enough about that debate to know who had the best of the argument. But whenever Brother Short was in a tight place, he could turn a phrase that would set the crowd laughing at the other side.

"You say Joseph Smith read those tablets with Urim and Thummim," he'd roar at the Mormons. "And where, I ask you, did he get the gold for the Urim and Thummim? I'll tell you where he got 'em! He thumbed 'em and euchered 'em."

One old sister who was sort of turned to the Mormon persuasion always sat up in the amen corner, an' one day she couldn't stand any more of that.

When Brother Short filed one of the Mormon arguments away with some reply, she cackled out: "I doubt it. I doubt it."

Brother Short broke off in his speech an' looked a gimlet-hole right through her for a minute.

"Thomas doubted and was damned," he hollered, an' went right

on with his argument.

There weren't any judges, an' no decision to that debate, an' I doubt if anybody felt any different after it than he had before it. But we got one thing out of it that I still remember.

They'd open every session with a hymn, takin' turns. And one of the Mormon hymns was one I'll never forget. It began:

Hail to the brightness of Zion's glad morning!

Joy to the lands that in darkness have lain.

Hushed be the accents of sorrow and mourning,

Zion in triumph begins her glad reign.

It was a good song to sing, whether it was Mormon or not, and later on when we younguns read Scott's "Lady of the Lake", we used to sing "Hail to the Chief", to the same tune. They ought to try it some time down at Washington. The one they use for the President may be a little more stately, but it's not got half as much life to it.

The Mormons had another good song, too, that we learned; and it came in mighty handy later on when we had a political baptising. But that's politics and not religion, an' doesn't belong here.

Sometimes the visitin' preachers made a few converts, and sometimes not. We were always kind of sorry for the one Universalist that ever came through.

He was a sweet old man, who always wore a black suit and a white, stiff collar, and he preached at the school every night for a week. I couldn't understand much of what he said, but Dad said he had a good education and fine reasoning. But all he ever accomplished, so far as I could find out, was to make a sort of odd

impression on one man.

Jeff Conley, one of the town drunks, had gone to the first sermon about half tight, which was pretty good for him, and seemed to be very deeply impressed. He sobered up and went back every night till the preacher left on Saturday morning, an' we all wondered if he was going to be converted. But if he was, it didn't last long.

The only thing anybody ever got out of him about how he felt on the matter was when Father met up with him that same Saturday night, weavin' along as usual. "I'll tell you about these Universalists," he confided. "They're very ungodly people."

But of all the freakish sects that ever landed in our corner of the mountains, the wildest was what they called the Brethren of the Rock. It landed in Lawrence County in the person of a woman preacher, young, red-headed, and by our standards a right good looker.

Nobody in our neck of the woods had ever heard of the Brethren of the Rock before. But we did have two or three kinds of Holy Rollers, and the word got around among them quick. Now one of the funny things about Holy Rollers is that no matter how thick they are, you never see any of them. There're half a dozen different bunches, all with different names, an' they may roll or may not, but none of 'em'll ever admit they are Holy Rollers. They'll always tell you that the Holiness church is Holy Roller, or the Church of God, or the Brethren in Christ, or the New Jerusalem Church; but nobody ever admits being a Holy Roller, himself.

That's the first thing I remember about the Brethren of the Rock. That woman preacher had come in about lay-by time (that's

when you lay the crops by -- quit working them and let them finish growing by themselves) and had started what she waid was goin' to be an old-fashioned camp-meetin'. I was traipsin' along after Dad when he asked Lafe Pelphry if the Brethren of the Rock were Holy Rollers.

Lafe considered the matter while he drew out a twist of tobacco, looked it over, and bit off a sizeable chew. He chomped on it a couple of times, until he could send a spray of ambeer that lit square in a knot-hole in a log six feet away.

"Naw," he said slowly. "They ain't Holy Rollers. But when they have a meetin' all the Holy Rollers go."

Lafe must've been right, for we never did know how many Holy Rollers there were till that meetin' started.

That red-headed woman preacher didn't believe in churches, she said. She went out in the woods towards Redbush an' started the men that came out that way to buildin' an arbor. They put up posts and hewed poles to peg across from one to another, an' then they wove tree limbs -- little ones with leaves -- back and forth to make a roof. They split logs an' made benches, an' everything was ready in less'n a week.

Uncle Ham went over to the meetin' the first night she started preachin'. He came by our house the next day, an' told us about it.

"Ol' Uncle Jackson Rice was down there an' he led the singin' an' lined out the hymns for a while. After while the red-head got up an' said: 'We will bow for a few minutes of silent prayer.' I don't know whether anybody else did any prayin', but I didn't.

"All of a sudden she raised up an' began hollerin' at the top

o' her voice:

"O, Lord! O, Lord!

"Send fire! Send fire!

"Send fire to burn up the prejudice against the second coming of Christ."

"With that she begun preachin' an' screamin' an' quotin' Scripture at the top o' her voice, an' before long the whole crowd was cryin' an' hollerin' too.

"She preached about an hour an' a half, an' then she called for sinners to come up to the mourner's bench, an' a whole bunch of 'em went. Finally all of 'em was shoutin' except Mandy Ronal'. Mandy just couldn' get right.

"There was ol' Uncle Jackson Rice a pattin' 'er on the back, an' ol' Mr. Ronal' a-pattin' 'er on the romp, sayin', 'Go right thu, Mandy. You'll git fer 'ligion.'

"Pretty soon Mandy jumped up an' cracked her heels together three times before she hit the ground. She started jumpin' an' shoutin'; an' every time she'd jump she'd shout, an' ever' time she'd shout she'd jump. She shouted herself right out o'her shoes, an' she busted the buttons off her dress all the way down the back. An' I'll swear, that woman didn't have on a stitch --"

Mother's frown halted the story. But I could see by Dad's face that he had a song comin' on. For once in his life, he busted out singin' right at table. I'd known "Cindy" since I was knee high to a hop-toad, but that's the first time I ever heard the shoutin' verses:

When Cindy got religion,

She shouted all aroun'.

She got so full of glory
That she shook her stockin's down.

Git along home, Cindy, Cindy;
Git along home, Cindy, Cindy;
Git along home, Cindy, Cindy;
I'll marry you some day.

She shouted down her shimmy;
She shouted down her hair;
An' if that preacher hadn't stopped
That gal been a shoutin' bare.

Then he sang the chorus again, an' we all joined in, even Mother.

I don't know just how long that camp meetin' went on, but people came from all over three counties. They camped in tents or wagons, or built brush lean-tos, an' there were wagons there sellin' beef, an' all kinds of things, -- an' some liquor, too, from what I've heard in later years.

Dad never would take us up there at night, but one Sunday we went up. I can still remember the smell of the arbor, with the leaves shrivelled and about half dry, a little like the smell of a hayfield, but with more tang.

They'd get a bunch up to the mourner's bench, and pretty soon they'd be shouting. It looked like fun, and I wanted to go, too, but I knew better, even at my age, than to ask. After a while, though, that woman preacher came round an' tried to get Dad up to

the mourner's bench. He was game for anything, and never was too good a hand at resistin' a woman, especially a pretty, red-headed woman, but there was Mother with her eye on him, an' she was a little bit red-headed, too. So Dad shook his head.

He was a mighty fine lookin' man, an' the woman preacher tried to argue with him: "Brother Swetnam," she said, "what do you have against the second coming?" Dad had a good sense of fun, an' when he begun to grin at that, she knew it wasn't any use to argue.

From what I heard later, they must have had some high old times at the night meetin's. After they'd got to shoutin' good, they'd get to rollin' on the ground, an' sometimes they'd roll right off into the woods.

I remember once hearin' Dad say he guessed there were more souls made than saved at that meetin', but it was a long time before I figured out what he meant.

Well, that meetin' was still goin' strong, when a man from off up in Magoffin County came down one day, an' when he left, the woman preacher left with him. That didn't leave anybody to preach but old Jim Eggleston.

Jim was a sort of a joiner. He'd started out as a Hardshell Baptist, an' then he started goin' to the Methodist church, an' got powerful interested. Finally he joined it, an' they made him a local preacher. Then a couple of years later the Church of God came along, an' he joined it.

I remember once Brother Short was at our house when somebody mentioned Jim, an' Brother Short said: "He went from the Baptist church to the Methodist Church, and from the Methodist Church to the Church of God, and from the Church of God to the Devil."

Well, Jim had joined up with the Brethren of the Rock, an' he took over, but he didn't do much good. I guess he didn't have a very good chance.

One of the first sermons he preached was about Balaam, the prophet whose jack-ass talked. Jim hadn't read the Bible story, for he couldn't read, an' I guess he hadn't told it so it was very clear, either.

He preached what you'd call a good missionary sermon. He took his text and then went everywhere preaching the Gospel.

Well, he'd wandered around a while, an' finally he got back to Balaam, an' he yelled: "And Balaam smote his ass. And his ass did bleed."

All of a sudden one old woman riz up in the middle of the crowd an' started yellin':

"He said 'ass', 'fore the whole congregation! He ought to be churched. He ought to have his aaaaass kicked! So he ought."

Well, Jim tried to explain things, best he could, an' convinced her there wasn't any reason to church him, which means kick him out of the church.

But people had got to laughin', and somehow they never do laugh an' shout at the same time, unless they have hysterics. So things just kind of petered out, an' that's the last we heard of the Brethren of the Rock.